DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 433 773 HE 032 323

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TITLE Online News vs. Traditional Media: Students' News Acquisition Preferences. AIR 1999 Annual Forum Paper.
PUB DATE 1999-06-00
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research (39th, Seattle, WA, May 30-June 3, 1999).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Citizenship Education; College Faculty; College Students; *Current Events; Databases; Higher Education; *Student Attitudes; Teacher Attitudes; *Use Studies; World Affairs; *World Wide Web
IDENTIFIERS *AIR Forum; LEXIS System; Tufts University MA

ABSTRACT

This study at Tufts University (Massachusetts) evaluated College NewsLink, a web-based newsclipping service, as part of a larger study to assess student preferences regarding the acquisition of current events information. The methodology was multi-pronged: first, faculty were surveyed concerning their familiarity with web-based products; second, students in classes in which NewsLink was incorporated were surveyed; third, faculty who used NewsLink in their courses were interviewed; and fourth, specific questions were designed and incorporated into the 1998 graduating senior survey. Overall, students who used NewsLink (and Lexis-Nexis) were generally satisfied with these online services, their ease of access, and ability to find pertinent articles. However, only 46 percent of students reported using Lexis-Nexis more than once during the semester and only 37.4 percent reported using NewsLink that often. The students appeared to rely primarily (79.3 percent) on television and secondarily (63 percent) on newspapers for their news information. Additional findings indicated that faculty were concerned about the organization and categorization of subject matter within NewsLink and generally preferred Lexis-Nexis. (DB)

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Online News vs. Traditional Media: Students' News Acquisition Preferences

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This paper was presented at the Thirty-Ninth Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research held in Seattle, Washington, May 30-June 3, 1999.
This paper was reviewed by the AIR Forum Publications Committee and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC Collection of AIR Forum Papers.

Dolores Vura
Editor
Air Forum Publications

ABSTRACT

Online News vs. Traditional Media: Students' News Acquisition Preferences

In the summer of 1997 a contract was signed with Prentice Hall to obtain university-wide access to Simon & Schuster's *College NewsLink*, a web-based newsclipping service with stories classified by academic discipline. As part of the license agreement, it was stipulated that the university would evaluate the product in terms of ease of access, reliability, desirability and usefulness. Simultaneously, there was interest on campus in determining how students prefer to receive their news information. In an era of limited resources, the question was being raised whether the university should use funds to provide multiple subscriptions to the *New York Times* or a daily electronic news service. This paper will describe how the institutional research office went about developing a strategy to evaluate *College NewsLink*, assess students' preferences regarding the acquisition of current events, and the difficulties that were encountered along the way.

Online News vs. Traditional Media: Students' News Acquisition Preferences

A 1996 study estimated that approximately 90 percent of college and university students in North America have ready Internet access, compared to less than one-tenth of the general population (Chidley, 1996).[1] Although internet access among U.S. adults has increased to about 40% since that time, it still lags well behind internet access among college students (Thompson, 1999).

Given that colleges and universities are now admitting students of the "NET generation", it is imperative that institutions understand how their learners acquire information. There is a dearth in the literature that explores this phenomenon. In fact, it has long been espoused that university students are subject to potentially different patterns of information acquisition than typical adult samples and as a result little is known about how college students acquire information about significant news events (Slater, 1983). A few studies, completed in the early eighties, examined student preferences between television and newspapers (Barrows, Clark & Klein, 1980; Henke, 1998; and Perloff, et al, 1982). To date, there appear to be no published findings that have added electronic news services to the mix.

In the summer of 1997, a contract was signed with Prentice Hall to obtain university-wide access to Simon & Schuster's *College NewsLink*, a web-based newsclipping service with stories classified by academic discipline.[2] As part of the license agreement, it was stipulated that the university would evaluate the product in terms of ease of access, reliability, desirability and usefulness. Simultaneously, there was interest on campus in determining how students prefer to receive their news information. In an era of limited resources, the question was being raised

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[1] In a recent National Telecommunications and Information Administration report, *Falling Through the NET II: New Data on the Digital Divide*, the 1997 nation-wide data indicated that in American households 18.6% had online access, 26.3% had modems, and 36.6% had personal computers (McConnaughy, Lader, Chin & Everette, 1998).

[2] The original website address for College Newslink was http://www.ssnewslink.com. This is no longer a viable site. Just two short years after its inception, this product is no longer available. Apparently, this venture was not profitable for Simon & Schuster.

whether the university should use funds to provide multiple subscriptions to the *New York Times* or a daily electronic news service. This paper will describe how the institutional research office went about developing a strategy to evaluate *College NewsLink*, assess student preferences regarding the acquisition of current events, and the difficulties that were encountered along the way.

METHODOLOGY

The approach taken to evaluate this product was multi-pronged. First, a short survey was administered to all faculty members to ascertain level of familiarity with web-based products. Second, surveys were administered to students in the various classes in which NewsLink was incorporated into the curriculum. Third, faculty members who used NewsLink in their courses were interviewed; and fourth, specific questions were designed and incorporated into the 1998 Graduating Senior Survey.

In October 1997, shortly after NewsLink became available for use on campus, a short survey designed to describe the product and gauge potential interest in incorporating the product into courses was distributed to all Tufts faculty. The survey asked five questions about familiarity and use of NewsLink, willingness to attend a training session, and use of the *New York Times* for teaching purposes. As with many faculty surveys, the response rate was very low at just 6 percent (N=76).

Students in courses where NewsLink was intentionally incorporated into the curriculum (NewsLink-enhanced courses) were queried to ascertain levels of usage and preferences for various web-based electronic information sources. One hundred forty-five students in five classes were surveyed. The courses were exclusively in the social sciences: Introduction to Psychology, Cognitive Aspects of Intergroup Relations, Survey of Social Theory, Judicial Politics, and Political Psychology. The survey instrument focused on student usage of electronic news services, students' perceptions of the quality of two distinct web-based

products, the magnitude of student usage of additional electronic tools, the types of resources utilized for research papers and projects, student newspaper reading behavior, and student preferences for obtaining current events.

At the close of the spring 1998 semester, the five faculty members who incorporated web-based products into their courses were interviewed. The interview protocol was quite extensive. Faculty were asked to provide information regarding their satisfaction with the specific web-based tools, a description of how the tool was integrated into their curriculum, their perceptions of student use, and an assessment of how such tools could be made available to other faculty members in their department.

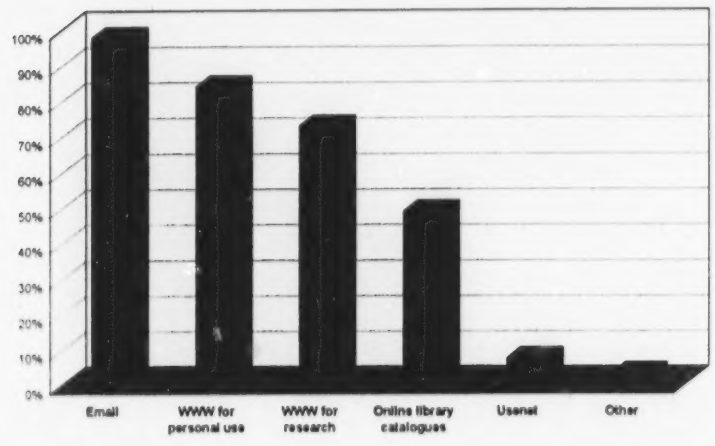
The 1998 Graduating Senior Survey included a limited number of questions regarding the acquisition of current events. Specifically, students were asked four questions: 1) whether they had used the online electronic news services, 2) to identify the newspapers they read on a regular basis, 3) to identify the information sources that they used during the academic year to learn about current events, and 4) their preferred source of current events information. Members of the Class of 1998 were surveyed prior to May graduation. The overall response rate was quite high (approximately 97%).

FINDINGS

Use of Electronic Resources

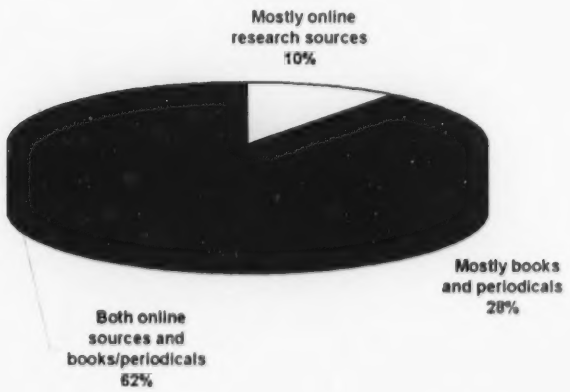
Tufts undergraduates are definitely part of the NET generation. Almost 100 percent of the students in the NewsLink-enhanced courses reported using e-mail regularly, 84 percent use the World Wide Web (WWW) for personal use, 73 percent use WWW for research, 49 percent use online library catalogues, and approximately 8 percent use listservs & newsgroups (Usenet).

Figure 1. Percent who Use These Electronic Tools on a Regular Basis



Of those students who use online resources for research papers and projects, most (68%) use these resources in tandem with books and periodicals. In addition, approximately 13 percent of the students in surveyed classes use the internet for research purposes as their main reference source. It is interesting to note that 43 percent of the respondents indicated that they had received training or asked for assistance in using Tufts electronic research tools.

Figure 2. References Sources Used for Research



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Examination of this population, albeit small, suggests that there are some significant differences between men and women in their approach to the use of electronic resources. More undergraduate men (92%) than women (78%) reported using the WWW for personal use. Undergraduate women reported using multiple-sources (both online resources and traditional resources, such as books and periodicals) for research purposes more frequently than their male counterparts (71% vs. 50%). Women were also more likely to indicate that they had received training for Tufts electronic research tools (48% vs. 37%).

There appear to be very few differences between the various classes and their use of electronic resources. Our initial hypothesis was that we would see more activity among the lower classmen than the upper classmen. Regardless of class year, all students seem to be using e-mail with about the same frequency. A slightly higher proportion of first-year and sophomores reported using the WWW for personal use and research. However the differences were not significant. Juniors and seniors reported using the online library catalogues with greater frequency than first-years and sophomores. Thus, it is not surprising that significantly more upper classmen reported having received training on Tufts electronic research tools.

NewsLink vs. Lexis-Nexis

Specific examination of students' perceptions of the quality of two distinct web-based products revealed that students were generally satisfied with these online electronic news services and would recommend them to other students. Over three-quarters of the respondents indicated that they would recommend these products to other students (NewsLink 75.6% vs. Lexis-Nexis 79.1%).

Usage of both NewsLink and Lexis-Nexis among students in the classes where faculty had purposefully introduced online electronic new services was surprisingly low. Approximately 41 percent of the students in these five classes indicated that they had used NewsLink or Lexis-Nexis. This compares with 34.7 percent of graduating seniors who indicated they had utilized

these products. Approximately 21 percent of the 1998 seniors indicated that they were "not familiar" with these products, which suggests that "lack of awareness" is not the primary cause for limited use among students.

Frequency of use varied between the two products. Students reported using Lexis-Nexis more often. Approximately 46 percent of the students used Lexis-Nexis more that once during the semester as compared to only 37.4 percent reporting the use of NewsLink more than once a semester.

Access to the online services was reliable and there appeared to be very little difference between the two products. The majority of respondents found access to the NewsLink site to be sufficiently fast at all times of the day, with the overwhelming majority finding it sufficiently fast in the morning (96.8%) and at night (84.6%). This was equally true of Lexis-Nexis. The majority of students (67.2%) tended to access NewsLink from their residence halls. In contrast, more students reported (36.7% vs. 23%) accessing Lexis-Nexis from Tisch Library.

It appears from the student perspective that both products provide ready access to recent and relevant news articles. Most (78.6%) of the students who used NewsLink to find articles for a class assignment or project were able to find a sufficient number of articles to support their research. This was also true for students (76.9%) who used Lexis-Nexis.

Students found both products fairly easy to use. In fact, the vast majority (88.1%) found it "very" or "moderately easy" to find pertinent articles on NewsLink. This was also true for the Lexis-Nexis product. While most found it easy to find articles in their subject area, it is important to look at the difficulties students reported. For both NewsLink and Lexis-Nexis, several students stated difficulties in narrowing their search and were frustrated with having to sift through hundreds of irrelevant articles. A few respondents encountered technical problems, including having the programs crash on their home computers and not being able to print from campus computer labs.

At the close of the spring 1998 semester, five faculty members were interviewed. The interview protocol was quite extensive. Faculty were asked to provide information regarding their satisfaction with the specific web-based tools, a description of how the tool was integrated into their curriculum, their perceptions of student use, and an assessment of how such tools could be made available to other faculty members in their department.

Since not all faculty were familiar with both products, it is difficult to provide a comprehensive comparative evaluation. Of the three faculty members who had used both products, it was clear that they preferred Lexis-Nexis. The primary concern with the NewsLink product was the organization and categorization of subject matter. News articles are grouped in ways that do not correspond with the current organizational structure of academic courses. In order to be a useful tool, faculty suggested that the categories need to be modified so that they more closely match standard divisions within each academic discipline. Faculty members in several disciplines (economics, sociology, and psychology) articulated this concern. In addition, there is no feature available that allows the users to set up a "personal keyword search" and receive only relevant articles on a regular basis.

Faculty seemed more likely to use these online electronic news services for research purposes and to enhance the currency of their curriculum than as a teaching aid. In most cases, students were encouraged to examine these resources and use them to provide background information and direction for additional exploration.

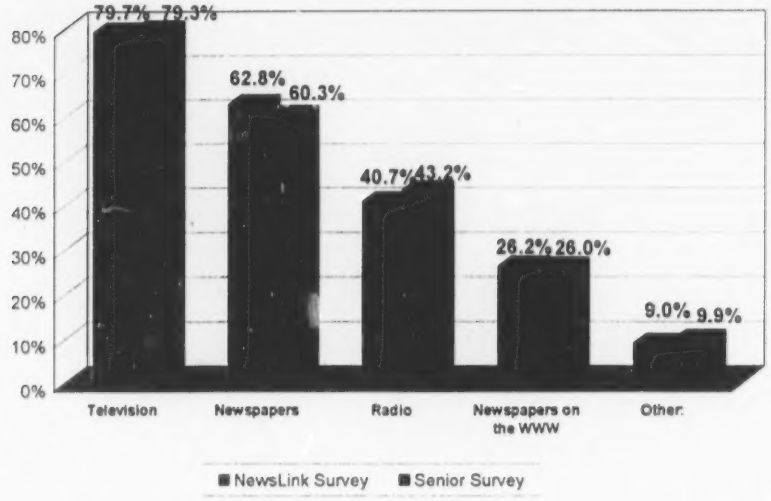
The five faculty members concurred that students were generally receptive to using these online electronic resources. However, they were quick to point out that students need at least rudimentary training in keyword search techniques for web-based research tools.

METHODS OF NEWS ACQUISITION

Members of the Class of 1998 and students enrolled in the *NewsLink*-enhanced courses were asked a variety of questions to determine their preference for acquiring current events

information, which medium they actually use for this purpose, as well as which newspapers they read on a regular basis.

Figure 3. Medium Used to Learn about Current Events



Our analysis revealed that most respondents read a newspaper on a regular basis. Responses varied between the two surveyed groups, approximately 77 percent of graduating seniors reported that they do read newspapers, compared with 92 percent of the students in NewsLink-enhanced courses. Both groups most frequently read the *Boston Globe*, *the New York Times*, and the *Tufts Daily*.

More students rely on television as their source of news. When given a choice, most students in NewsLink-enhanced classes prefer television to keep up with current events. Among the students who were enrolled in the NewsLink-enhanced classes, 79.3 percent indicated that they relied on television as a news source, while 63 percent indicated that they used the newspaper. Similarly, 79.7 percent of seniors indicated that they relied on television as a news source, while 60.3 percent indicated that they used the newspaper. When asked which they preferred, 53 percent of students in NewsLink-enhanced classes identified "watching news on

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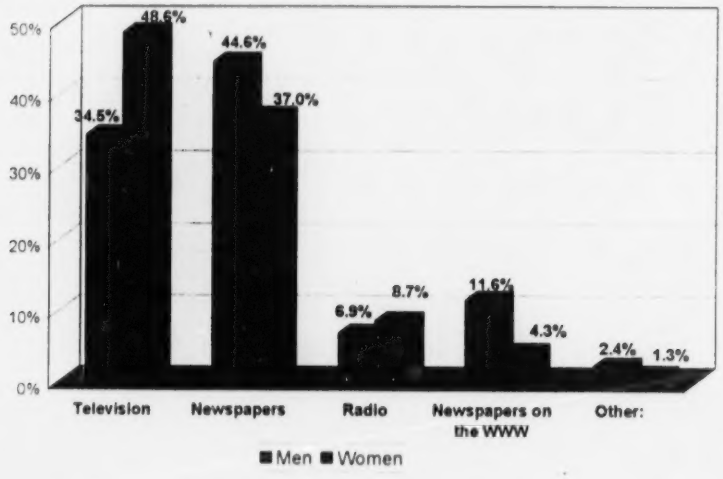
television" as the preferred source. Graduating seniors were more split on their preferred medium for current events, with slightly more preferring hardcopies of newspapers (41.2%) than television (40.8%).

Examination of preferences by gender revealed significant differences. In both populations, a higher percentage of women than men relied on television as a source of current events. Conversely a higher proportion of men than women read hard copies of newspapers. In fact, almost 50 percent of the women indicated that their preferred source of current events information was television as compared to only 34 percent of the men with a similar preference. A higher proportion of men (44%) identified hard copy newspaper as their preferred source.

Figure 4. Preferred Medium for Current Events
Men vs. Women



PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED

In the course of this evaluation, we encountered several difficulties that seemed to stem from a lack of central control over academic and research technologies on campus. This problem is probably not unique to Tufts, and has potential implications for other institutional researchers undertaking evaluations of internet-based research and teaching tools. At Tufts, there were no university-wide procedures for the review, purchase, marketing and technical

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support of new electronic research and teaching tools. Depending on perceived potential users and uses, electronic resources may be purchased, and therefore marketed and supported, by different departments or schools.

The NewsLink product in particular was problematic because of its multiple applications: for news acquisition, for research, or as a teaching aid. This created confusion over which department should be responsible for supporting and promoting the product. Amidst all this confusion, as institutional researchers, it was our responsibility to fulfill a contractual obligation to evaluate this product. However, because marketing for NewsLink was virtually non-existent, it was difficult to find a sufficiently large sample of current users who would be able to evaluate the product in terms of ease of use, access, reliability and desirability.

The current structure of our Internet servers also created problems in collecting data that could be helpful in measuring frequency of use. Prentice Hall provided us with monthly data on the number of requests and bytes sent on various Tufts subdomains. These subdomains represent the different web servers on campus, some serving a single academic department or computer lab, others serving the bulk of administrative, student and faculty units. On the frequency reports, the names and number of subdomains reporting activity differed each month, preventing cross comparisons. In addition, the bulk of activity occurred on the two servers that serve all three constituencies, making it impossible to discern whether students, faculty or staff accessed NewsLink most frequently.

Summary

Overall, students who used NewsLink and Lexis-Nexis were generally satisfied with these online electronic news services and would recommend them to other students. Respondents were generally very satisfied with ease of access and the ability to find pertinent articles. However, less than 50 percent of respondents indicated that they had used the products in the past year. Thus, it appears that while students are frequently at a computer and

on the Internet for e-mail or research, they generally do not choose to use the Internet to get their current events information. Rather, Tufts students rely on television and newspapers as their sources of news information. Moreover, students prefer television to newspapers. This is consistent with the findings from the Pew Research Center's Biennial News Consumption Survey that the "Internet is emerging as a supplement to – not as a replacement for – traditional print and television news (Donovan, 1998).

Given the rapid increase in the utilization of the WWW, it is quite likely that this is the wave of the future.[3] In fact, students may always prefer television as a source of news; however, with proper training and promotion, there is the possibility of increased utilization of such web-based research tools. For these tools to be embraced, both students and faculty will need to use the products and determine whether they will enhance their research.

It is clear that student and faculty use of electronic resources is not a passing phenomenon. The demand for resources to support these new technologies and sources of information, in all likelihood, will dramatically increase in the future.[4] Thus, it is critical that institutions begin to examine both usage and effectiveness. The next step at Tufts will be to develop a research plan and protocol that will address how to systematically evaluate utilization of resources, student and faculty preferences, effective integration of technology in the classroom, and demand for training.[5]

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[3] Additional information obtained from the Tufts Tisch Library 1999 Faculty survey supports the notion that faculty are using the web with greater frequency. Ninety-five percent of the respondents indicated that they access the library remotely. In fact, almost 20 percent indicated that they remotely accessed the library 4 or more times per week. Moreover, the library web page and e-mail from the library were identified by faculty as their preferred means of learning about library resources and services.

[4] Every year more students are bringing computers to campus. For those matriculating in the fall of 1998, ninety percent brought a computer to campus. Also, almost all the members of our most recent freshmen class (97%) had access to the Internet prior to enrolling at Tufts.

[5] As an interim step, the annual graduating senior survey has been modified to include questions regarding students' use of Internet to ascertain usage regarding communication, research, coursework, and entertainment. It is quite likely that these questions will be augmented in the future.

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